

International relations: overview 1 January-30 June 2020

1 October 2020

Reference: SPCB(2020)Paper 51

Executive summary

1. The International Strategy agreed by the SPCB in January 2017 stated that the International Relations Office (IRO) would produce a twice-yearly overview of core international work undertaken by the Scottish Parliament. This paper covers the period 1 January-30 June 2020.

Background

2. The IRO is responsible for the development and implementation of the International Strategy. While it facilitates most inward and outward international visits, it is not involved in every visit to or from the Parliament e.g. those undertaken by committees as part of an inquiry or by MSPs on cross party groups. This paper therefore does not reflect all the Parliament's international activity, only that supported by the IRO.

3. The current International Strategy built on the experiences and practices applied by the Parliament in developing its international relations approach. Its central focus remains, i.e. linking international work to the Strategic Plan.

4. The continued link to the priorities of the Strategic Plan has allowed the IRO to better plan outward activity, which in turn has led to a more efficient linking to resources. In short, the Parliament can more easily identify what it wants to do, why, and when. In addition, the case for an outward visit is supported by the opportunity to discuss with other legislatures policy issues which are of topical relevance to committees as well as other corporate priorities (which might cover matters of interest to the SPCB itself). It is these three components – policy, procedural, corporate – which underpin the 'business case' for IRO supported outward work.

Overview

5. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has curtailed all international engagement and travel. In March, and in line with the SPCB's decisions on the scaling back of parliamentary activities during the outbreak, all planned inward and outward international visits were cancelled by the IRO. This remains the position. The IRO responded quickly by initiating a series of virtual discussions for the Presiding Officers with other legislatures and organisations with which the Parliament has prioritised strengthening relations. These were:

- Presiding Officer and François Paradis MNA, President of the National Assembly of Québec
- Presiding Officer and Ilse Aigner MdL, President of the Bavarian State Parliament
- Presiding Officer and Dr Gabrielle Andretta MdL, President of the State Parliament of Lower Saxony
- Presiding Officer and Silja Dögg Gunnarsdóttir MP, President of the Nordic Council and Steingrímur J. Sigfússon MP, Speaker of the Icelandic Parliament
- Deputy Presiding Officer Linda Fabiani MSP and Ilse Aigner MdL, President of the Bavarian State Parliament (the DPO was due to lead a delegation to Munich in May). This virtual meeting discussed increasing the representation of women in parliament and parliamentary diversity

6. In addition, the IRO itself held further virtual discussions with officials in the above and other legislatures (the parliaments of Latvia and Lithuania, European Parliament) on similar issues. The Parliament's strengthening friendships and relationships has, under the current situation, allowed it to quickly and easily communicate with others facing similar challenges. The Presiding Officer, through these discussions, was able to share experiences and knowledge on the parliamentary response to COVID-19 e.g. operating remote voting systems, sitting patterns, virtual meetings, seating arrangements in plenary and committees, changes to parliamentary rules etc.

7. The IRO also put together a questionnaire to gather information on broadcasting, virtual meetings, remote voting etc which it circulated to around 15 parliaments. The IRO also communicated with other parliaments (in Canada, Europe, Australia and New Zealand) on behalf of offices here interested in their approaches on some corporate issues (allowances schemes, parliament security).

Countries/parliaments/organisations

8. Annexed is a new infographic showing inward and outward visits in the period of this report. This new infographic also includes data on visit topics.

Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) Scotland Branch

9. Scotland Branch Members undertook the following CPA activities:
- Margaret Mitchell MSP attended the BIMR Commonwealth Women Parliamentarian's conference in the Falkland Islands
 - Presiding Officer and Stuart McMillan and Margaret Mitchell (as members of the Branch Executive Committee (BEC)) met with Hon. John Ajaka MLC, President of the Legislative Council of New South Wales and Vice-Chair of the CPA Executive Committee

- BEC marked Commonwealth Day 2020 by lodging a motion and posting a series of tweets highlighting the work of the Scotland Branch
- Bill Bowman MSP was due to attend the CPA Public Accounts Committees Pan-Commonwealth Workshop in London (cancelled due to COVID-19)
- BEC was due to attend the CPA BIMR Annual Conference in Malta in May (postponed due to COVID-19 - will take place virtually in September)
- Margaret Mitchell MSP participated in a CPA virtual roundtable discussion on Responding to COVID-19 and parliamentary democracy post quarantine

Other Commonwealth (non-CPA):

- Deputy Presiding Officer Linda Fabiani MSP and Liam McArthur MSP (member of the BEC) met with the Hon. Madalitso Kazombo and the Hon. Nkungulu Aisha Mambo Adams, Deputy Speakers of the Parliament of Malawi
- Presiding Officer, Deputy Presiding Officer Linda Fabiani MSP and the BEC met with the Rt Hon Catherine Hara MP, Speaker of the Parliament of Malawi
- Presiding Officer met François Paradis MNA, President of the National Assembly of Québec for discussions on public engagement, parliamentary reform, parliamentary business procedure and the current political and constitutional landscape in Scotland

British Irish Parliamentary Assembly

10. During the reporting period there was no BIPA activity. The planned plenary meeting due to take place in County Meath, Ireland in June was cancelled because of COVID-19.

Outward visits

11. Due to COVID-19 no outward visits took place. Confirmed IRO supported visits to New York and Boston (Presiding Officer led delegation) and the parliaments of Bavaria and Baden Württemberg (both Deputy Presiding Officer (Linda Fabiani) led delegations) were cancelled.

Parliamentary strengthening

Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD)

12. The IRO continues to consider carefully, when assessing any approach to engage in such programmed activity, the impact involvement would have on the wider responsibilities and priorities of Members and officials and of the need to prioritise the Parliament's core international interests which the IRO supports.

There are two WFD engagements to highlight: The

- Business Resilience Manager participated in virtual discussions on business resilience; and
- Head of Strategy and Portfolio Management participated in a virtual conference on strategic planning

Future reporting

13. In the first activity report submitted to the SPCB (November 2017), it was highlighted that the IRO would look at new methods of publicising the Parliament's international activity e.g the attached infographics, improvements to the 'International Activity' webpage with more photos and narrative around inward visits. The IRO Twitter account launched on 1 January 2019 now has over 1,900 followers and has proved very successful in not only showcasing the Parliament's international work but allowing the IRO to pick up information from other legislatures and international organisations and share with other offices in the Parliament.

14. The IRO is currently preparing an international visitor guide which will set out relevant information to IRO supported visitors.

Resource implications

15. There are no resource implications arising from this paper. All visits in this period were accommodated from within the IRO budget or from other sources e.g. the CPA.

Publication scheme

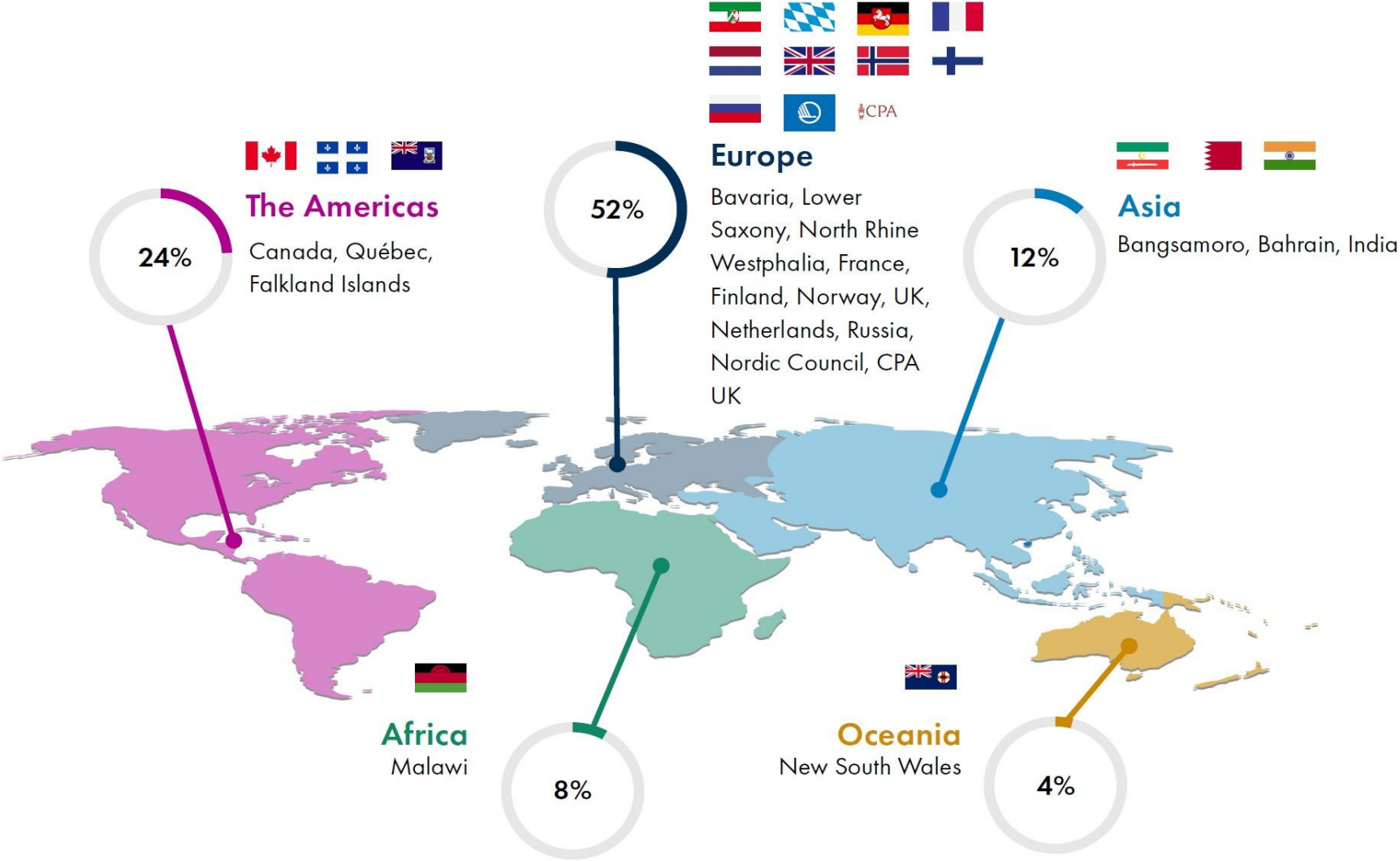
16. This paper will be published in line with the SPCB's Publication Scheme.

Decision

17. The SPCB is invited to note the activity undertaken across the first six months of 2020.

International Relations Office September 2020

International Activity: 1 January to 30 June 2020



International Activity: 1 January to 30 June 2020

Designations

Speaker



Parliamentarians



Ambassador



Interparliamentary organisation



Consul General



Parliament Officials



Agent-General



Parliament Interns



Why did they visit?

